NASA Probe Launched by Boeing Delta II Heading to Mercury

The first mission to explore the Planet Mercury in more than three decades began today with the successful launch of NASA's MESSENGER (**ME**rcury **S**urface, **S**pace, **EN**vironment, **GE**ochemistry and **R**anging) spacecraft aboard a Boeing Delta II Heavy launch vehicle.

The launch occurred at 2:15:56 a.m. EDT from Space Launch Complex 17B at Cape Canaveral Air Force Station, Fla. Following a 57-minute flight, the spacecraft was deployed to an Earth-escape trajectory.

Upon arriving at Mercury in 2008, MESSENGER will make three passes of the planet before entering orbit around it in March 2011 to become the first spacecraft to visit Mercury since Mariner 10 in 1974-75.

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